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SUBJECT: CAPEL TO AUDIT VENEZUELA'S ELECTORAL REGISTER

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor, for
reason 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Venezuela's National Electoral Council (CNE) commissioned the Costa Rica-based Center for Electoral Promotion and Assistance (CAPEL) in late June to perform an audit of the Electoral Register. The CNE is relying on CAPEL, an organization affiliated with the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights, to declare the Electoral Register legitimate and transparent. Opponents of President Hugo Chavez, including the NGO Sumate, have questioned CAPEL's independence from the CNE and the methodology and extent of its audit. The CNE is also attempting to incorporate national election observation network OJO Electoral in the audit of the Electoral Register, while Sumate presses its campaign of individual challenges of irregularities in the Register. End Summary.

CAPEL AUDIT AND METHODOLOGY

2. (C) An organization affiliated with the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights, the Costa Rica-based Center for Electoral Promotion and Assistance (CAPEL) provides technical assistance to electoral bodies in the hemisphere. CAPEL submitted the proposal for an audit of Venezuela's Electoral Register in late June, and Venezuela's National Electoral Council (CNE) accepted the proposal to sign what "appears to be" a multimillion dollar contract, according to OJO Electoral report given to PolCouns. To perform the audit, CAPEL will rely primarily on CNE officials, expertise and access. CAPEL has privately submitted the technical plan of the audit to the CNE. Scheduled to begin in late August and finish at the end of September, the six-week audit will have two parts. First, CAPEL will conduct interviews throughout the country. Next, the voter base will be audited for the deceased, prisoners, and people with other irregularities. The sample will consist of 1% of the electoral base, which corresponds to over 70,000 people. The results of the audit will include suggested reforms for the CNE to improve the electoral system.

METHODOLOGY AND CRITICISM OF THE AUDIT

3. (C) Opposition leaders have criticized CAPEL for its direct connection to the CNE. Sumate spokespersons have called CAPEL an agent of the CNE, arguing that its audit should not be a substitute for a public audit, according to press. They argue that the CNE must still release a complete Electoral Register so that public groups can perform external audits. The opposition has urged CAPEL to make its results public, but CAPEL has refused to submit them to anyone but the CNE, which has agreed that it will release them later to the public.

4. (C) Opposition leaders emphasize the need for CAPEL to not audit merely the Register, but also the Department of Immigration (Onidex), in particular by investigating its issuance of identity documents to millions in 2004 through Chavez' "Identity Mission." (Note: According to the technical proposal for the audit given to PolCouns, though it has not yet been made public, CAPEL will audit Onidex's issuance of identity documents through the Identity Mission.) Critics of the plan to audit 1% of the voter base call for a 3-5% sample, which CAPEL says is unfeasible. National Democratic Institute (NDI) contacts told Poloff that the CNE will have an incentive to implement some of the reforms the CAPEL audit produces, if no more than to create a more favorable public and international image. Even with a late-September release date, NDI said that significant reforms probably will not be implemented before the December legislative elections.

5. (U) The Organic Law of Suffrage and Political

Participation (LOSPP) requires the CNE to release the Register to political parties or other groups at their request. The opposition claims the CNE has failed to release the complete Electoral Register because it lacks voter addresses and dates of birth. They argue the CNE has released only names and identity card numbers, even though the LOSPP states that the Register should also include dates of birth, residences, and voting center information.

ROLE OF THE OJO

16. (C) In an attempt to counter criticism, the CNE has announced it is developing roles for political parties and NGOs to play in the CAPEL audit. On 15 June, domestic observation group OJO Electoral accepted the CNE's offer to perform a particular role in the CAPEL audit. OJO plans to use the opportunity to build its national observation network in preparation for subsequent elections. The group will perform a special study of the Electoral Register, which will be complementary to the CAPEL audit. OJO has negotiated with the CNE to access the whole Electoral Register database. If access is blocked at any point, OJO plans to walk away from the process, according to OJO report given to PolCouns. OJO will use NDI for "back-up" technical assistance.

COMMENT

17. (C) The CNE is probably wagering that the results of CAPEL's audit will make their guarantee of transparency in future elections appear legitimate. However, the CAPEL audit will offer too little, too late. The audit will not be complete by the August 7 elections. By the time any meaningful reforms are implemented, by 2006 presidential elections at best, they are not likely to be of any value to Chavez's competitors. With a 4-1 majority of pro-GOV rectoros, the CNE has been a means for the GOV to increase its control over the electoral system. Although CAPEL has reported no problems receiving the necessary information, its reliance on the Pro-Chavez CNE, its prohibition from publicizing results, and its long timeline for completing the project will not convince the anti-Chavez part of the electorate to expect fair elections.
Brownfield